



**The Circus is in Town: Exploring Consumption, Mobility,
and Corporate Capitalism in the World of Formula 1
Motor Racing**

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Introduction

Contemporary society is marked by speed. Within these alleged postmodern times many people live in a hyper-world of instant lifestyles, fast food, and snap decisions. Information and image are transferred at terminal velocities as symbolic capitalism transfers funds, futures, and options as well as advertising iconography over fibre optic cable or satellite communication systems. Identity and mobility have become intrinsically linked as advertising agencies exploit visions of global, contemporary nomadic travellers armed with Italian-designer business suits, palm pilots, mobile phones, and exotic aftershave. It is in this mobile and image-intense world that the elite motor sport known as Formula One (F1) resides. Formula One exists as a contradictory, paradoxical, and multifaceted entity. It is a hybrid of sport and business in which the most technologically advanced motor vehicles on the planet act as speeding billboards for international oil, telecommunications, or tobacco corporations. It is global, brash, noisy, consuming, polluting, chauvinistic, intense, and corporatised, it is, in effect, a mirror of many aspects of contemporary Western society. The sins of Western decadence broadcast to a near-global audience are reflected in Formula One.

Much more than a series of motor-races Formula One is a product of the integration of capital, image, consumption, sport, entertainment, and media that has emerged over the last few decades. Like films producing video game spin-offs or containing product placements for digital cameras, soft drinks, and cars Formula One blends, or just plain abolishes and obliterates, the lines between advertising, entertainment, and corporate sound bites. Symbolic, communal, personal, and corporate imagery merge as teams and sponsors become inseparable. Moreover, Formula One exists as one of

those rare sporting competitions that can lay claim to global significance. During the 2003 season races were staged on five continents including non-European events in Malaysia, Brazil, Japan, the United States, Canada, and Australia. In 2004 the first stages of a new ambitious expansion plan will commence with races in Bahrain and China, while rumours persist that Formula One's executive are keen to expand the series even further to Turkey, Russia, and even India. The global and multinational element of Formula One continues within the teams. Whilst the current crop of drivers are dominated by Europeans (14) and Brazilians (4) racers from nations such as Malaysia, Canada, Colombia, Australia, and Japan have competed in recent years with varying levels of success. Moreover, most teams but especially Minardi, Jordan, and Toyota have incorporated technological expertise and sponsorship from well outside the traditional periphery of European-centred motorsport.

In its essence Formula One is a circus, a contemporary form of carnival (Bahktin 1984), a liminal, transient space based on a morality of excess, spectacle and success. Yet, like so many aspects of contemporary society the world of Formula One is a contradiction. It is neither modern nor postmodern. In some ways, Formula One is quintessentially modern. Progress, technological advancement, the drive to succeed, to conquer, to be victorious are all 'modern' desires present within Formula One. As is the explicit chauvinism epitomised by the ever-present scantily clad and highly sexualised 'pit-girls' and the implicit phallic worship of masculine supremacy triumphant over the dangers and boundaries of speed. Yet there are elements within Formula One that seem more postmodern. In particular, the fusing of entertainment, sport, symbolic capital, and image into a single digestible product, a sign-commodity, to be consumed and deployed has reverberations with the work of Baudrillard (1983;

1996; 1998). Although on the surface this paper may first appear to be a simple and rather ineffectual analysis of Formula One embedded within the discussion is a deeper desire to explore and investigate the complex interweaving of capital, identity, mobility, entertainment, and image that is perhaps the dominant feature of contemporary society and culture. This interweaving of previously divergent concepts, which has been interpreted by many theorists as a shift towards the postmodern (Featherstone 1991), can be attributed at one level to an intensification of many aspects of everyday life including faster travel, the bombardment of signs and images, and the acceleration of technological change. Formula One provides one, albeit dramatic, example of this shift. The plethora of lifestyle, gardening, and home and self-improvement television programs, the aforementioned barrage of product-placements, the phenomenon of 'Reality TV' with its seemingly never-ending quest to find new heroes, and the return of the tradition of versatile cross-over entertainers and performers might all be viewed as examples of the blurring of the lines between identity, capital, and entertainment. This analysis of Formula One comprises two distinct but conceptually related components. The first section of this paper explores the notion of Formula One as spectacle and carnival. Specially, this section investigates the notion of Formula One as a highly intensified and capitalised contemporary version of historical carnivals as analysed in the writing of Bakhtin (1984). This section asserts that just as Medieval and Renaissance festivals harked back to pleasurable, unrestricted and uncontrolled eras through their celebrations of gluttony, excess, and the grotesque contemporary Formula One acts as a time machine taking fans and participants back to less enlightened age where rampant sexism, environmental disregard, extremely questionable health practices, and an ideology of progress and success at any cost were far more accepted than today. The second

component delves in the image-laden world corporate and marketing logics to investigate the interrelation between advertising, identity, and consumption within Formula One motorsport. Through a cataloguing of over thirty of the ten Formula One's team's major sponsors this section argues that bombardment of visual signs advertising elite global mega-brands constructs a specific identity, that of the global business traveller. Moreover, this section asserts that through the consumption of Formula One as a commodity fans engage in a deployment of visual indicators designed to link themselves with the desired jet-setter lifestyle.

Formula One as Carnival

More than most sporting events a Formula One Grand Prix is a concoction of sound, colour, heat, oil, dust, and the 'fragrance' of high-octane fuel. Action is never limited to the track. At most circuits fans can wander most of the raceway's prescient lapping up the atmosphere, observing Motorsport-related displays and exhibitions, browsing the formidable range of team merchandise sold from modified semi-trailers, and enjoying a gamut of other entertainment including aerial displays, stunt riders, live music, and demonstration races. For enthusiasts, Formula One is a spectacle, a festival of sensory overload that celebrates the modern and hyper-masculine ideals of stronger, faster, better. Moreover, sex and Formula One become coupled through the deployment and exploitation of pit-girls. These wandering billboards of lycra and flesh are commodified and de-humanised as they perform circuits of the course posing for pictures while being ogled by fans in a frenzy of masculine fantasies. The combination of overload, indulgence, and sensory and symbolic bombardment that occurs at a Formula One Grand Prix has parallels with the carnivals of the 16th century recorded by the French writer Rabelais and later analysed by Russian

philosopher, sociologist, and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1984). Bakhtin (1984)'s exploration of 16th century feudal festivals and folk culture highlighted a historical pursuit of extravagance that sought through humour, performance, food, and various delights of the body to break free, at least temporarily, of the powerful restraints of Church. Captured within Bakhtin (1984)'s work are images of wild and untamed feasts, parties, and celebrations lead and maintained by peasant folk in an ecstasy of the grotesque, the pleasurable, the ironic, and the ridiculous. As Langman (2003: 226) explains,

“Carnivals were times and places of inversions, sanctioned deviance and reversals of norms. It stood opposed to the official feasts and tournaments that celebrated the power of the elites, who were instead parodied, mocked, hectored, and ridiculed.

Moral boundaries from the political to the erotic were transgressed.”

Carnival then represented a temporary and unmediated exhibition of vice, an opportunity for the poor to experience a diversity of sensations and revel unrestricted by the harsh moral codes of the theological regimes.

As a near unparalleled celebration of excess, exotic imagery, fantasy, sensation, stimulation, and speed the world of Formula One can be seen as having similarities with the carnivals of old described by Bakhtin (1984). However, as Langman (2003) points out in her analysis of contemporary forms of ‘carnivalistic’ entertainment, such as the Rio de Janeiro Carnival or American Football’s Superbowl, in the global age of symbolic capitalism and sign-consumption ‘modern’ festivals of extravagance are produced and mediated by corporate organisations. While still resulting in a curbing or subversion of social norms contemporary carnivals lack the spontaneity and perhaps authenticity of previous incarnations. Formula One and other contemporary forms of carnival are to Bakhtin (1984)'s 16th-century peasant inspired festivals what

Lollapalooza is to the original 1969 Woodstock music festival; a corporate sanctioned and endorsed imitation that nonetheless produces similar results in constructing a temporary forum for an indulgence in otherwise sanctioned or censured pursuits. Like the carnivals of old, Formula One represents a fleeting and intoxicating overload of many of the vices and excesses of contemporary society. Indeed, it could be argued that packaged in a single Formula One Grand Prix are many of the 'evils' of contemporary society such as sexual exploitation, unabated and unmonitored technological advancement, pollution and environmental degradation, the promotion of cancer-inducing tobacco products, and lifestyle consumerism.

Yet critically for the concept of carnival, Formula One and its fellow contemporary festivals of indulgence, are transient and liminal events. These are only every temporary celebrations. Formula One can be conceptualised as an avenue or outlet for indulgence and masculine expression. In this light, Formula One can be viewed as a momentary dream or fantasy world, as an escape from the confinements of contemporary society and the restrictions and challenges of new social norms and behaviours required within the umbrella of political correctness. Sociologists such as Langman (2003) would probably agree with this perspective. For Langman (2003) the Superbowl represents a stylised and symbolic war. While only the players are true combatants, American Football (and other contact sports) can be interpreted as a highly ritualised depiction of violence and masculinity that enables men to assert and exercise their primal male urges. Indeed, within this perspective there are additional parallels with Elias (1994; and Dunning 1986) who saw sport as an example of the gradual transformation of uncontrolled and unmediated behaviour through regimes of educative social control. Yet there is a significant danger in underplaying the damage

of such contemporary carnival events. Although the widely reported ‘fact’ that domestic violence reports rise on Superbowl game day is an urban myth that has gained validity through repetition scholars need to be careful lest they be accused of endorsing inappropriate or immoral activities within their analyses of carnivals as outlets for indulgence. However, whether Formula One should be considered as temporary, harmless fun for big boys watching toys or an example of the insidious continuation of patriarchal modernist and capitalist ideology is an entirely different debate and not one that can be easily engaged by an analytical sociological reading found in this paper. Nevertheless, what is apparent, is that despite the advanced technology on display on the racing circuit, Formula One, like Bakhtin (1984)’s carnivals, is a celebration of older, and political darker times, where departed or dieing values are resurrected and commemorated in a fiesta of noise, smoke, sex, and colour.

Corporation, Advertising, and Identity

An analysis of the major sponsors of the ten Formula One teams highlights the relationship and interaction between sport, advertising, corporate imagery, and identity. In reviewing the major sponsors several patterns and anomalies emerge. The principal yet easily forgotten corporate-affiliation (either a sponsor, partner, or paid supplier) possessed by seven of the ten teams is an engine manufacturer. While the Ferrari, Renault, and Toyota teams construct both their team’s chassis and engine the remaining seven teams employ separate manufacturers for the cars two essential components. In particular, Ford-Cosworth supplies both the Jaguar and Jordan teams, while Sauber uses a rebadged Ferrari engine, Italian minnows Minardi use Asia-Tech engines, whereas British American Racing draw on a Honda design, finally Ferrari’s

major rivals Williams and McLaren incorporate BMW and Mercedes power-plants respectively. Unsurprisingly, with the exception of the struggling Asia-Tech, the engine suppliers of Formula One teams represent most of the major players in the history of the automotive industry.

The thirty sponsors catalogued for this exercise arise from a divergent collection of corporations. Unexpectedly of the team's thirty combined sponsors only five, multinational oil and petrochemical giants Shell, Elf, Mobil, Liqui Moly, and Petronas, are directly linked to the automotive industry. Even more surprising is the relatively low status of the automotive-related sponsors. In spite of their international brand significance and obvious links to Motorsport only Sauber's Petronas can be regarded as a principal sponsor. In contrast, Shell, Elf, Mobil, and Liqui Moly are relegated to secondary or tertiary levels sponsors with only moderate or minor coverage on the car's chassis. On the contrary, and despite the looming European Union-wide tobacco-advertising ban, cigarette makers back half of the current Formula One teams. Marlboro (Ferrari), West (McLaren), Lucky Strike (BAR), Mild Seven (Renault), and Benson and Hedges (Jordan) are all either principal or secondary sponsors with prominent, and thus incredibly expensive, positions on the vehicles rear and front wings as well as side-pods. Yet with tobacco advertising bans in-place in many race-staging nations these teams must compete with modified liveries. This restriction on advertising has lead to some creative attempts to circumvent the anti-tobacco regulations. In particular, some teams replace the tobacco products name with a similar sounding alternative. Thus BAR's Lucky Strike becomes *Look Alike* while the text 'Benson and Hedges' on the Jordan car is modified to read *Be On Edge*. Thirdly, given the boom in mobile phones it is predictable that

mobile telecommunications and information services corporations form a major category in Formula One sponsors. Siemens Mobile, AT & T, Intercond, and Sina all support various teams whilst Vodafone has secured the most prized piece of sponsor's real estate on the side-pod of the Ferrari. Equally predictable is the association with electronics and computer firms such as Panasonic, Hewlett-Packard, Trust, and Brother. Although in the hyper-masculine and chauvinistic world of Formula One the sight of hair-care manufacturer Wella's logo on the Toyota team car is quite unexpected. Formula One's fifth observable sponsorship category is occupied by the banking and financial sectors (HSBC, Credit Suisse, Allianz) while transport and logistics companies Federal Express, Hanjin, and European Aviation round out the list of classifiable corporations.

From this extensive but not exhaustive list of Formula One's major sponsors several observations can be made. The first aspect immediately noticeable is the magnitude and scale of many of the corporations involved. Firms like Vodafone, Shell, Marlboro, and Panasonic are at the forefront of the emerging trend of global mega-brands. These companies are instantly recognisable with significant operations and interests in multiple regions. Yet equally significant is the second tier of Formula One's lesser known but still powerful corporate backers. These influential but largely unfamiliar and exotic firms include Chinese shipping firm Hajin, Malaysia petrochemical concern Petronas, and Russian energy giant Gazprom. Unlike the global mega-brands that use Formula One to continue their international brand-awareness the second tier sponsors employ their advertising more strategically. In some cases these second tier companies utilise Formula One to target a particular and specific clientele. Indeed, for these corporations the goal of advertising is not

blatant and general exposure but instead a carefully orchestrated advertising gamble/campaign whose targets are potential investors rather than the general public of clients, consumers, or customers.

Nevertheless, the precise reasoning for major corporations investing hundreds of millions of dollars to advertise on these speeding billboards that only are ever seen on sixteen occasions a year is still unclear. Conventional advertising wisdom would suggest that the relationship between teams and sponsors can be understood in terms of the advertisers wish to be associated with a successful Motorsport team. In the image driven world of advertising where form and function are lost amidst an array of seductive visions, metaphors, and signifiers the symbolic relationship between a Formula One team and an otherwise unrelated corporate entity is one whereby any of the team's success reflect on the corporation by association. In other words, for the mobile telecommunications giant Vodafone, one of Ferrari's principal sponsors, any and every of Italian-based team's victories is immediately associated with Vodafone. Ferrari and Vodafone are both considered winners although only one is technically competing on the racetrack. However, the implications of the affiliation of certain corporations with Formula One teams extends beyond this traditional advertising logic to encompass a larger phenomenon whereby an image and lifestyle of the ideal 'man' (and it is always a man) is constructed through the deployment of visual signs and associations with Formula One.

Rather than a haphazard bombardment of unrelated and unconnected images, products, corporations, and signs the advertising logic of Formula One's sponsors actively constructs a vision of their perfect consumer. By collating the team's various

sponsors an image materialises of a figure that can be labelled as the contemporary business nomad (Parker 2002). Young, aggressive, and technologically aware (Panasonic, Trust, Brother), armed with a laptop (Hewlett-Packard) and mobile phone (Vodafone, Siemens) the contemporary business nomad represents the latest incarnation of transient business class. The contemporary business nomad is a gambler in the world of casino capitalism (Strange 1986). He (sic) has derived his income from ingenious and wise financial investment and speculation (HSBC, Allianz, Credit Suisse, SAP, Sina), has discerning taste (Becks) and is conscious of his appearance (Wella, Hugo Boss), and in between global conquests and travel (European Aviation, Federal Express, Hajin) lives an exotic, exciting and above all active lifestyle (Tag Heuer, Red Bull). However, the reality is, of course, that only the smallest fraction of the world's many Formula One supporters and fans bare any resemblance to the contemporary business nomad. The contemporary business nomad is almost a fantasy, an illusionary spectre that haunts the cable business channels CNN, BBC World, and CNBC. For all intents and purposes he (sic) is symbol, an image, and an advertising and marketing tool. When compared to the actually number of expatriate and mobile businesspeople that live actually live the 'playboy' lifestyle the amount of advertising and imagery directed towards this elite class seems absurd. However, the logic of the advertising is based on the logic of the sign (Baudrillard 1996; 1998). Consumers are being sold an ideal, imagined image. Smoke Marlboro, West, or Mild Seven, drink Becks, use Vodafone, carry a Hewlett-Packard laptop, be closer to your dreams, look like the part, believe in the collective illusion. Perhaps this analysis is too critical, its vision too dystopic. After all, contemporary society is increasingly image reliant as the lines between symbol and reality become progressively more indistinguishable (Baudrillard 1983; 1988).

The logic of corporate sponsorship of Formula One is intrinsically linked to principals of symbolic and conspicuous consumption (Veblen 1994). As the classic sociologists of modernity Veblen (1994) and Simmel (1990; 1997) argue in rapid and dehumanising times individuals search through consumption for an avenue of individual expression. Equally and paradoxically, however, through their consumption of status-heavy signs these individuals are attempting to join a collectivity. Through the intoxicating fusion of entertainment, capital, and image consumers of Formula One strive for a connection, albeit symbolic, with a 'playboy', jet-set lifestyle.

Conclusion

Despite the 2003 season being the most competitive series in recent years both television ratings and attendance at many circuits has fallen dramatically this year. The precise reasons for this decline in support are unclear however many insiders attribute the fall to the continuing dominance of Ferrari's Michael Schumacher, the radical new single-lap qualification system introduced this year, and a perception that over-taking and passing within the elite category does not occur enough. It may be tempting to contend that the reduction in television audiences and crowd numbers can be linked to a change in social attitudes away from the overtly corporate and chauvinistic world that is Formula One. However, to make this contention would be a mistake and a grave over-reading of the situation. Formula One is a product of contemporary society and is in many respects a reflection of contemporary society. The experience of postmodern life is one infused with image, signs, and symbols. Entertainment and culture seem melded to the interests of big business as sport, music, film, and even art become branded, commodified, packaged, and sold. Despite

recent declines Formula One continues to be a significant global entity. It was and remains at the forefront of this merging of image, spectacle, sport, and capitalism. Through an investigation of Formula One as carnival (Bahktin 1984) and an analysis of the sport's major sponsors this paper has explored the interactions between image, spectacle, symbolic capitalism, sport, and global marketing that make Formula One a compelling example of the complexities and paradoxes of the contemporary global landscape. A baffling combination of sport, marketing, and Mardi Gras Formula One exists as an all-encompassing icon of the perfect hyper-masculine dream lifestyle constructed through fantasies of wealth, speed, sex, and fame.

Endnotes

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Electronic Resources

The data regarding Formula One was compiled from a combination of the author's knowledge and information collected from the following electronic achieves.

General Information

<http://www.f1-live.com>

<http://www.itv-f1.com/>

<http://www.fia.com/>

Team Homepages

<http://www.ferrari.it>

<http://www.mclaren.com/>

<http://www.bmw.williamsf1.com/>

<http://www.renault.com/>

<http://www.sauber.ch/>

<http://www.f1jordan.com/>

<http://www.jaguar-racing.com/>

<http://www.jaguar-racing.com/>

<http://www.minardi.it/eng/>

<http://www.toyota-f1.com>

Appendix 1

2003 Formula One Teams and Major Sponsors

Team / Chassis	Engine	Principal Sponsor	Secondary	Tertiary
Ferrari	Ferrari	Vodafone	Marlboro	Shell
Williams	BMW	HP	Allianz	Federal Express
McLaren	Mercedes	West	Mobil 1	Siemens Mobile
Renault	Renault	Mild Seven	Elf	Hanjin
Sauber	Ferrari	Petronas	Red Bull	Credit Suisse
British American Racing	Honda	Lucky Strike	Intercond	Sina
Jaguar	Ford	HSBC	Becks	AT & T
Toyota	Toyota	Panasonic	Wella	Travellex
Jordan	Ford	Benson & Hedges	Liqui Moly	Brother
Minardi	Asia-Tech	European Aviation	Trust	Gazprom
Other / General		Tag Heuer	SAP	Boss